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TALKS SERIES 2009 A · JAN – MAR

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RAIN *for the* SEA



Reflections for a Time of Meditation

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Transcript of talks recorded on CD
under the same title

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I. CONTEMPLATION AND LOVE

The prayer of contemplation is an experience of practising selfless love, a love that brings us beyond our ego-selves to the Other and to all others.

We call the love we experience at the level of our egos: *eros*. We call the love we experience at the level of our true self: *agape*.

An example of *agape* love happened to me as I sat beside my mother's bed a day before she died. An ambulance siren rang through the city streets close to our home. It somehow penetrated the thick coma-like sleep that enveloped my mother. Her eyes opened and dreamily met mine for the first time in many hours. She then looked at me and asked, "Is daddy alright?" "Yes," I replied, "he's fine; he's in the living room." My mother, assured that the one she loved was safe from harm, slipped back into the sleep she would not awaken from again.

There seems to be something in us that knows, and yet doesn't want to know, that there is such a thing as an egoless love, a selfless love. Perhaps it is precisely because of this realisation that we begin to resist prayer. We are afraid that this God we name Love will be too demanding, that we will be required to sacrifice too much and consequently lose out on the things we need or want. Often we equate God's love with the experience of loss and personal diminishment. We do this because many of our experiences of human love have been limited to the love of *eros* and not moved into the love of *agape*. Consequently, they confirmed our experience that love can be painful or diminishing in some way.

The experience of Christian meditation leads us beyond our ego consciousness and its ways of loving, *eros*, and beyond its experiences and fears about love, to a whole other-consciousness: contemplative consciousness. Here we discover ourselves in Divine Love which simultaneously means that we do what love does: we move beyond ourselves in order to be for the Other and others. We do not experience any diminishment in the love of *agape*; rather, we

experience greater depths of awareness: loving, being, freedom, identity.

Our contemplative practice of Christian meditation gently leads us into the realisation of Divine Love, the love of *agape*. It is an experience free from guilt, free from anxiety, free from fear of any diminishment. It is this experience that leads us to prayer and enables us to say with the Psalmist:

*Let morning announce your love
for it is you I trust;
Show me the right way
for I offer you myself.*

(Psalm 143:8)



2. AN AWAKENED HEART

Ultimately, all contemplative prayer is about love and the full realisation of love. The contemplative prayer of Christian meditation is a path to this awakened state.

We can be shocked into this awakened state but, for most of us, it is a gradual process. Gradually, we step through the heavy mist that has accumulated around our life, its meaning and our essential nature. In the Gospel of Matthew, we see Peter shocked into an awakened state after he hears Jesus say that the Son of God must suffer many things. "No," Peter intervenes. Peter does this probably out of his own intuitive need not to be identified with this kind of leader and probably because of his love for Jesus. At Peter's intervention, Jesus turns to him and uses words that lash against Peter's belief system, in a way similar to a Zen teacher who walks among the students as they meditate and without warning lashes out a palm reed across the student's shoulder with the intention of shocking the student into a more wakeful state. Jesus' words to Peter, "Get behind me Satan", must have had a similar effect. They shocked Peter. Peter is awakened into a new mind state about Jesus, about suffering, and about the cost of discipleship.

There is a promise of an awakened heart each time we meditate, a promise of seeing into the essence of life, of going beyond our fragile beleaguered and misinformed mind states to a place of truth and love. For most of us, the change or awakening we experienced might be as imperceptible as the change in the relationship between two people who first experience each other as acquaintances, then as close friends. If asked, "Over which cup of coffee, did you become friends?" they don't know. They know they are friends. For most of us, the awakenings into a new consciousness are imperceptible as well.

Since our prayer leads us into the experience of Divine Love, changes in our beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and values gradually emerge. We notice we have become more sensitised to and intolerant of all that is the antithesis of love

such as racism, sexism, the abuse of power, and our own lust, greed, avarice. We feel more compelled to be actively concerned about and involved with issues of peace and justice as well as the needs of people who are poor. We can no longer be entertained by watching violence and abuse portrayed on our movies and TV screens. All of this is the result of an awakened heart, a heart that has had some of the fog around it penetrated by Divine Light, a heart that has been moved beyond its own limited perceptions.

Through our prayer, we are awakened into the experience of Divine Love. Like Peter, we are awakened into a new vision of reality.



3. THE EXPERIENCE OF KNOWING

No human concept, image or ways of speaking about God can ever fully reflect the holy mystery of who God is. Nor can any experience of God that we might have bring us into a knowledge of God that is complete.

We who follow the path of Christian meditation open ourselves to the experience of God unmediated by images. At the same time, we also realise how necessary it is to find images or metaphors that express what is revealed to us because of our prayer time. The image of Mother God guiding us, coaxing us, through the birth canal into our true identity comes from the experience of contemplatives who feel nurtured, cared for in their search for oneness with Divine Love. Each prayer period, as it were, brings us to the breast of Mother God and feeds us with the Divine milk that keeps us moving on our journey of faith. This experience of nurturing is not something known through our usual ways of knowing, namely through our intellect and emotions; rather, it is something we experience from a totally different place, perhaps, through what the mystics spoke of as the interior senses. The experience of the interior senses may or may not flow into our intellect and emotions.

Our prayer of Christian meditation brings us into the experience of holy mystery. It is an experience of penetrating at ever deeper levels the depth of my own being and the being of God and knowing that they are one.

Human relationships of friendship help us understand this experience of knowing. It is not the specific things that someone buys for us or does for us that identify our experience as a relationship of love. Rather, it is the experience of their seeing into us, as it were, going beyond all our foibles and personality traits and loving us for who we are. In this friendship, we come to know "I am loved".

The experience of our prayer time is the ritual we set around the mutual relationship of love that exists between ourselves and the Divine Other. We are drawn to this prayer time because Mother God has nurtured our wavering belief

in God's love for us and because of our desire and longing to express our love and find oneness in the eternal being of love. The experience of our prayer time is the formalised experience of our life's energies directed to ultimate reality. We were meant from all eternity to know our goodness, lovable-ness and truth; to know that we are in a mutual relationship of love with the God who delights in us and that this delight is not dependent on anything. We do not have to earn this love or to achieve it. It is just there, always there. It is not dependent on our moods either, or our personalities or accomplishments. Nothing can separate us from this love.

We speak of our lives as spiritual journeys because we are forever trying to uncover this truth about ourselves. Our God is there at the very place of recognition, waiting patiently for us to make this discovery. Our God is there drawing us, coaxing us, encouraging us to discover "I am loved, unconditionally loved". Glimpses of this truth become known to us as we move along on our journey of faith. Perhaps we find we are becoming less defensive in our relationships, less insecure, more compassionate and forgiving to others and to ourselves.

Our prayer time is the formal setting where we acknowledge and say yes to this relationship of mutual love. It is here where the draw of Divine Love and our heart's longing kiss.



4. DESIRE AND FULFILMENT

There are moments in our lives when we sense the deliciousness of desire meeting fulfilment. Perhaps it's a nice cold drink of water on a brutally hot day; the comfort of a cushioned chair after a long wait standing; the moment of completing a difficult task after many long hours of work; the sound of a friend's voice after many attempts trying to reach them by phone; the excitement and delight of love that culminates in intercourse and self-giving.

But however delicious these moments are, they are not lasting. All too soon, we are left with a new thirst, a new desire for completion, for satisfaction. The wisdom of age helps us come to this reality of life to some degree. We struggle to make peace with the fact that nothing in this life lasts nor does it totally fulfil us. The result is that there is a spiritual gnawing constantly going on inside of ourselves. We are hungry to have the emptiness that is inside of us find fulfilment; to have desire quelled in the everlasting; to have our desire for love find love that fills us and takes away our isolation and emptiness.

The image of the bride and groom that is found in sacred scripture's *Song of Songs* is a wonderful metaphor of the relationship that exists between God and ourselves. It is an image of love that is personal, all-encompassing, complete, and everlasting. In this image, we see the beloved and the loved one moving towards each other. Their meeting is one of ecstasy and oneness. This image, like so many other images and metaphors about our spiritual relationship with the Divine, is as useful as a pointer to the experience of oneness which is already ours, but which is not yet realised in us. It is important to remind ourselves, however, that in reality we are not moving towards God, not trying to attain God or come closer to God. Rather, God is the very reality of our being, the centre of our person. We are, in other words, already in union with God, but we are blocked from this awareness of our original nature.

The practice of meditation is our awakened consciousness admitting to this reality, and centering ourselves in it. The person who meditates knows that in actuality, we are not moving closer to God through lives of virtue and contemplation, but that we move beyond our egos (that place in us that constantly seeks gratification and fulfilment in pleasures or things that are impermanent in their very nature) and into a whole other experience of the self, the *true* self. "What was your original face?" the Zen teacher asks the student. "The face you had before your parents were born."

In meditation, the repetition of the mantra helps us shift the centre of our consciousness from the ego, loosening its attachments to lust, power, greed, self pre-occupation, and a myriad of other forces that would have us see the ego as the place of our identity and the centre of reality. When we can detach from this ego, its yearnings for perfection, its false perceptions, its confined and distorted patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, acting; it is then that we discover the truth about us: the true self or our original face. All images fail in adequately describing this experience because the experience of the true self is the experience of knowing oneself in union with Divine Love. Our finite minds have no words or descriptions that can convey this experience in its totality. So we use images and metaphors to portray it in some form that our minds can incorporate. Saints, mystics, artists, poets help us in identifying the experience.

The discovery of our original face is the discovery of the true self. It is an experience without form, but it is known to us when we can say the words: "I am." No descriptors follow because none is necessary – no "I am rich", "I am smart", tall, sick, fat, degree-d, a millionaire. There are no descriptors because the self now needs no outside thing to help it experience itself as worthwhile, lovable or good, because it has discovered its own essential goodness, its own essential nature. It has discovered itself in God who is total goodness and unsurpassable love.

The journey of meditation is not a narcissistic adventure whose end is self-absorption. What is known to us of God

and God's Trinitarian nature is also true of us when the centre of consciousness is located in the true self. The one who knows the experience of "I am" immediately and spontaneously says, as does each person of the Trinity: "May you also be." True contemplative prayer always leads us beyond our self to others in love and service. It is this dynamic of contemplative prayer and self-giving where desire and fulfilment are realised at a level possible to our finite state. Each time we begin our meditation the very gesture of moving into this prayer-time and beginning to pray our mantra is a way of acknowledging and realising that we are already one, in and with Divine Life.



5. SEASONS

Our experience of ourselves around the times of prayer can be likened to the seasons of the year.

Summer

There are times when the fruits of prayer and the prayer experience itself feel rich, satisfactory, full. During this season, we are drawn easily to our meditation times by our desire and longing for oneness in Divine Love. In this season, the hope for fulfilment of the promise is very much alive and we are glad and eager participants in this practice of our prayer. During this summer-like season, our prayer time passes all too quickly. Our detachment from projects, thoughts or things that need doing comes easily because we relish and delight in the time set aside for our meditation.

Autumn

Autumn in the life cycle of spiritual practice is a time of change. The riches of ease, comfort, and delight in prayer seem to fade. Questions about the practice begin to emerge. Am I doing it right? Is it worth doing? And so on. In the autumn of spiritual practice, it becomes easier to find excuses for not praying – things to do, a telephone call to be returned, more time for a project. In this season, our commitment often becomes shaky as the emotional and sensible pleasures we experienced about our prayer begin to wane.

Winter

The experience of Christian meditation is meant to move us beyond the ego into the experience of the true self, the self already in union with Divine Love. This movement takes us beyond the ordinary ways of knowing or describing ourselves, and beyond our concepts and images about God as well. This detachment from our ego-consciousness is an experience of death. As such, we resist and deny it. This resistance might not be conscious at first, but its signs show up around the

practice of our prayer as boredom, irritability, restlessness, as well as a distaste for prayer itself. This is the winter time of spiritual practice.

Winter, as those who live in cold climates know, is a time for hardy souls. The winter of spiritual practice is a time for hardy spiritual souls as well. It is a time to exercise faith and remain constant in prayer. It is a time to trust the love that is drawing us; a time to walk on water, as it were, and hold the gaze of the beloved whose hand is reaching out towards us.

Spring

When the winter of spiritual practice is made conscious, when we allow things to be as they are and not demand the consolations of the past, and make peace with our experience as it is, change happens. Both ancient and modern mystics speak of the time of spiritual darkness as a time of absence of any sensible experience of God, a time of doubt, desolation, loss and death. Often, they speak concurrently of this being a time when darkness is sweet, comforting, consoling, liberating. Darkness is my mother, writes one modern-day mystic. The experience of Christ becomes our experience whenever death in any of its forms is entered into in faith. We, like Christ, realise new resurrected life. This is the spring of spiritual practice.

We are changed. Our experience of new life can result in a radical change of life-style, behaviour, beliefs, options, commitments. Or the more subtle changes – of faith knowing a deeper broader base; of hope more charged or invigorated; of love known and experienced more deeply, more maturely, more universally.

The seasons of our spiritual practice are not defined by time, space or psychology. They are the images we use to articulate what we experience as we are drawn ever more deeply into the realisation of our being discovered and found in the Being of Divine Love.



6. ICE HOUSES

Those who practise Christian meditation each day can sometimes feel that nothing is happening in their prayer, that their prayer seems flat or dull or futile. This is what our prayer may feel like on the level of our *external* senses.

An image for this experience of prayer might be found in those climates that have frigid winters. During this season, their lakes freeze and are layered with the accumulation of snow. No longer can the breeze ripple its waters. No longer can it reflect the clouds drifting above it or mirror the sun and moon dancing upon it. Rather, the lake presents the observer with a picture of frozen stillness. Winter seems to have closed down the lake and its activity and life. But what is not immediately seen by some is known to others who will clear away a few feet of snow and drill through the solid layers of ice, sometimes a distance of four feet, to reach the lake's flowing waters. These hardy winter souls know that the lake teems with life and activity beneath its surface. Many will erect small wooden shelters, ice-houses, where they will sit fishing, enjoying nature in another form of beauty and becoming one with the silence and stillness which surround them.

In our prayer, it is our interior sense – those senses that are part of mystical consciousness or contemplative consciousness – which tells us of the Divine Life and activity happening deep within us despite the surface experience of our prayer. It is this interior sense of knowing, a knowing that we are already one with Divine Love, that brings us back to our prayer periods each day no matter what our surface experience is. It is this interior sense of knowing, perhaps not felt in the emotions or body during our times of prayer, that allows us to sit in the silence of our prayer, alert to the possibility of the full realisation of Divine Love but patient with the process that is involved in our awakening to this realisation. Each prayer period is our active participation in this process. It is the expression of our faith and love.



7. WATERCOLOUR

Meditation can be likened to painting with watercolour. Watercolour moves beyond the sketched lines and makes its way down the wet surface of the watercolour paper. Defying preconceived boundaries, watercolour creates its own beauty.

Each day in our prayer of Christian meditation, as we become still and quiet before Divine Life, we allow the waters of this life to move us across the defined lines of ordinary consciousness and into a whole other consciousness, a place not defined by our usual ways of experiencing or knowing ourselves and the world around us.

It is not always easy for us to allow the waters of Divine Life to carry us beyond the boundaries of the self as we usually know it, that is beyond our egos. However, we keep returning to our times of prayer precisely because we share in the very life and activity of our God. Remaining faithful to our daily practice of meditation comes from our life's energies participating in the creative energies of Divine Life itself. This energy of Divine Life is what we experience as an impulse or urge to continue to be faithful in the daily commitment to our prayer and to our spiritual journeys. It is the very experience of Divine Life that draws us into prayer and enables us to be the open space, or empty canvas, where the waters of Divine Life may gently move and join us to the experience of contemplative consciousness: a consciousness that participates in the very life of God; a consciousness that will realise at ever deeper levels the experience of ultimate beauty, ultimate love; a consciousness that will realise our own loveliness, beauty, goodness.

Our times of prayer, though seemingly routine and ordinary, are nevertheless effecting this change in us.

